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UNCLAS HANOI 001821

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV, EAP/PD, AND DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: REDUCTION IN FATHER LY'S SENTENCE

1. (U) This is an action request -- see para 3.

2. (U) Court officials in Ha Nam province on July 17 confirmed media reports that the court had reduced the cumulative 15 years sentences of Catholic Father Nguyen Van Ly by five years in recognition of his "good behavior" in prison. Court officials confirmed that he was in a prison in Ha Nam province and described him as an "obedient prisoner." They indicated that this reduction was a "normal practice" that had not been specifically requested by Father Ly or his relatives. He will also remain subject to a five year administrative detention order following his new release date in 2011.

2. (U) Comment: The GVN clearly believes that it should win international -- particularly, U.S. -- commendation for this step, which shows how little senior GVN officials yet understand the nature of our differences on human rights. This reduction in sentence is a hollow and perhaps even counter-productive gesture that will only remind the international community and members of Congress of this Catholic priest sentenced to 15 years in prison for nothing more than speaking his mind. We should be quite frank in our calls for his release. End Comment.

3. (U) Suggested press guidance: The five year reduction in Father Nguyen Van Ly's 15 year sentences is a hollow gesture, since he should never have been tried and convicted. The GVN should instead immediately release Father Ly and all other prisoners who have done nothing more than exercise their right to free speech and other basic freedoms.
BURGHARDT